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ABSTRACT

Many surveys of school psychologists have documented their desire to devote more time to consultation--an indirect service delivery system in which the school psychologist interacts with a consultee (teacher, parent, other professional) for purposes of solving a client problem. To expand the work of Martin and Curtis (1981) on school psychologists' attributions regarding consultation outcomes, questionnaires were completed by 234 school psychologists who reported their attributions for success and failure in consultation. The results indicated that the type of problem presented for consultation was predominantly a student problem involving behavior or academic difficulties and the client was most likely to be a boy in elementary or middle school. The results from chi-square analyses were highly significant, indicating that the psychologists attributed approximately 22 percent of successful cases and only 6 percent of failures to themselves. Conversely, they attributed 42 percent of successful cases and 77 percent of failures to the consultee. Respondents were more likely to report failure with teacher consultees compared to parent or parent-teacher consultees. Comparisons of psychologist characteristics with reasons for success or failure revealed that psychologists with a wide range of experience and characteristics were similar in their attributions. (Suggestions for training programs in school psychology drawn from these findings are discussed.) (NRB)

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SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' ATTRIBUTIONS FOR SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN CONSULTATION

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School Psychologists' Attributions for Success and Failure in Consultation

ABSTRACT

In order to gather data concerning types of consultation cases most likely to be viewed as successful or unsuccessful by school psychologists and the reasons for success and failure, questionnaires were sent to a nationwide random sample of 389 practicing school psychologists. Responses were received from 243 practitioners. Chi-square analyses indicated a significantly greater number of attributions to the consultee in the failure condition as compared to the success condition. Respondents were more likely to report failure with teacher consultation as compared to parent or parent-teacher consultation. The implications of these results for consultation training and practice are discussed.

Numerous surveys of school psychologists have documented their desire to devote more time to consultation (see Hughes, 1979; Meacham & Peckham, 1978; Smith, 1984). In fact, consultation has become one of the major functions of school psychologists (Gutkin & Curtis, 1982). The primary impetus for this desire to spend more time in consultation derives from two large advantages of indirect services over direct services. First, more potential clients are served when the school psychologist "gives away" his or her specialized knowledge to a consultee, who then applies this knowledge to a larger number of students than could be reached directly. And second, the potential for primary and secondary prevention of future problems increases as a function of consultee mastery of present problem situations.

Despite this documented desire to spend more time in consultation, recent surveys of school psychologists indicate that formal training in this area is the exception rather than the rule. For example, Meyers, Wurtz and Flanagan (1981) surveyed 121 School Psychology training programs and found that 60% of them did not offer a course focusing exclusively on consultation. These findings, coupled with the fact that provision of indirect services is a relatively recent phenomenon in school psychology, led Gutkin and Curtis (1982) to conclude that, "most school

psychologists who are currently practicing have little, if any, formal training in consultation." (p. 828)

As noted, consultation involves an indirect service delivery system in which the school psychologist interacts with a consultee (teacher, parent, or other professional) for purposes of mutually solving a client problem. Although numerous theoretical models have been proposed for consultation in the schools (see, for example, Conoley & Conoley, 1981), a number of common threads run through all consultative approaches. Reynolds, Gutkin, Elliott and Witt (1984) have discussed these in some detail. They suggest that the "core characteristics" of school based consultation include: (a) indirect service delivery, (b) a focus on professional problems, (c) a dual set of goals emphasizing both remediation and prevention of problems, (d) a coordinate status between consultant and consultee of equality, (e) active involvement of the consultee in the problem-solving process, (f) a voluntary basis for establishing a consultative relationship, (g) the right of the consulteee to reject consultant suggestions, (h) an assurance of confidentiality between consultant and consultee, and finally (i) careful attention to both process and content variables in consultation.

Each of the above aspects of consultation has been researched to some extent; however, most often this has been accomplished in the context of consultant or consultee

characteristics or outcomes of consultation. From the perspective of consultant characteristics, previous studies have examined such factors as professional expertise (Martin, 1978), amount of time spent with the consultee (Gutkin, 1980), and the personal characteristics and skills of the consultant (Fine, Grantham & Wright, 1979). Various consultee characteristics have also been examined, including locus of control (Alpert, Ballantyne & Griffiths, 1981), years of teaching experience (Gilmore & Chandy, 1973; Martin & Curtis, 1980), and personality variables (Goldman & Cowan, 1976). Relatively few studies, however, have examined the specific types of cases that are most likely to be viewed as successful or unsuccessful by school psychologists. That such research is needed was pointed out by Conoley and Conoley (1981) in their review of studies concerned with the types of problems most often presented for consultation. They concluded that previous studies, "do not point to which problems are the most amenable to consultation." (p. 270)

Integral to the process of explaining success and failure, particularly in achievement situations, are the attributions made for the success or failure by the person directly involved. The basis for attribution theory is that people systemmatically assign causes to events in order to account for their outcomes. These attributions not only serve to plausibly explain past events but also carry consequences for subsequent feelings and behavior by

creating a set of expectancies about similar future events (Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins & Weiner, 1972).

Two dimensions of attribution processes, locus of control (internal-external) and stability (temporary-stable), have been identified by Weiner (1971, 1972, 1974). The interaction of the two dimensions results in four primary categories for assigning causal explanations to events: (a) ability (internal-stable), (b) effort (internal-temporary), (c) task difficulty (external-stable), and luck (external-temporary). After reviewing a number of attribution-achievement studies, Bar-Tal (1978) concluded that attributions to lack of effort in failure situations result in higher expectancy for future success, whereas attributions to lack of ability result in lowered expectations for future success. Similarly, attributions to ability in success situations result in high expectancy for future success, whereas attributions to ease of task result in lowered expectancy for success. Additionally, it was noted that there is a tendency for females to be more external in their attributions than males.

These findings suggest that consultants who attribute success to internal-stable causes would have reason to expect future consultations to be successful, while consultants who attribute success to external-stable causes may have reason to expect future consultation outcomes to be uncertain. Similarly, consultants who attribute failure to

internal-stable causes would expect future consultations to be unsuccessful, whereas attributions to external-temporary causes for failure would not necessarily reduce expectations of future success.

Martin and Curtis (1981) addressed the issue of causality for success and failure in consultation by asking a sample of school psychologists to recall their most successful and least successful consultation cases over the past five years. Responses were classified in six major categories, including (a) acts or characteristics of the consultant, (b) acts or characteristics of the consultee, (c) the consultant-consultee relationship, (d) nature of the interventions, (e) external factors, and (f) noncategorizable in a major category. The major findings of the study indicated that a significantly greater number of attributions were made to the consultee in the failure condition as compared to the success condition. It was also found that the specific reasons given for success or failure were global and undifferentiated, most often generally invoking expertise, motivation, or follow-through of either the consultant or consultee.

In spite of the significance of the findings, two factors make it difficult to generalize these results to other school psychologists. First, the sample was not representative and was restricted to a small geographical region. And second, permitting the respondents to use

consultations up to five years old may have facilitated reconstructive errors in recalling specific reasons for success or failure. This study was designed to expand the original work of Martin and Curtis (1981) by obtaining a more representative sample of school psychologists and surveying their attributions for success and failure in consultation, and by applying a more detailed analysis of their specific reasons given for success and failure.

Method

In order to ensure that the subjects for the study were practicing school psychologists routinely engaged in consultation, the subject pool responding to the National School Psychology Questionnaire (NSPQ; Smith, 1984) was used. The original pool for the NSPQ was developed on a state by state basis from state department of education lists of practicing school psychologists, where available (81% of the total sample). In cases where this was not possible (11 states representing 19% of the total sample), membership lists of state school psychology organizations or NASP were used. The NSPQ was sent to a random sample of 15% of the school psychologists from each state. A return rate of 49% was obtained.

Subjects for the present study were randomly selected from those responding to the NSPQ and indicating that they spent at least 10% of their time in consultation.

Questionnaires were sent to a national sample of 389 practitioners. They were asked to recall their most successful and least successful consultation case from the past year. For each case, respondents were instructed to identify the consultee (parent or teacher); indicate the age, grade, and sex of the target of the consultation; describe the type of problem; and indicate the primary reason for success or failure.

Responses were received from 243 subjects from 37 states, for a return rate of 62%. Of this total, 234 questionnaires were used in data analysis. Nine questionnaires were excluded because of incomplete data or respondents who were no longer practicing school psychologists.

The sample consisted of 141 males and 93 females. Average school psychology experience was 9.58 years and average teaching experience was 3.00 years. One-hundred and eleven of the respondents had no teaching experience at all. A master's degree was held by 11% of the participants, a master's plus 30 by 44%, a specialist degree by 27%, and a doctoral degree by 18%. The mean school psychologist to student ratio was 1:2016, the mean percentage of time spent in consultation was 23.9%, and the mean percentage of time desired for consultation was 39.1%. Additional characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results

The participants in the present study indicated that they were actively involved in providing consultative services but would like to be more involved, with 59% of the respondents preferring to spend more than 30% of their time in consultation. The type of problem presented for consultation was predominantly a student problem in both successful (83%) and unsuccessful (85%) cases. Behavioral difficulties comprised the major subcategory (48% successful and 46% unsuccessful) followed closely by academic problems (34% successful and 39% unsuccessful). These results are presented in greater detail in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The majority of consultations involved female consultees only (69%). Both males and females were involved in 19% of the consultations and males only were consultees in 12% of the cases reported. An equal number of consultations involved parents (41%) or teachers (41%), whereas both teachers and parents were included in 18% of

the consultations. The clients targeted for consultation were primarily male (75%) and were largely from the elementary and middle school grades.

The reasons for consultation success and failure were independently categorized by the researchers using the major categories proposed by Martin and Curtis (1981). Agreement was obtained on 211 of the successes and 225 of the failures, yielding interrater reliability coefficients of .90 and .96, respectively. The cases in which a consensus was not reached were placed in the noncategorizable category along with those that did not fit into the other major categories.

A chi-square analysis was used to examine the differences in attributions for successful and unsuccessful consultations using the major categories described. The results were highly significant ($X^2(35) = 70.05$; $p < .001$). Consistent with previous studies, the consultants attributed approximately 22% of successful cases to themselves, but only 6% of failures to themselves. Conversely, they attributed 42% of successful cases to the consultee and an overwhelming 77% of failures to the consultee as well. Breakdowns of these consultant attributions are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

The chi-square performed on success or failure of consultation by involvement of teacher, parent, or both was also highly significant ($X^2(2) = 26.12$; $p < .001$). Consultations involving teachers only were more often identified as unsuccessful (approximately 61% of the time), whereas consultations involving parents only or both parents and teachers were more often identified as being successful (approximately 52% and 75% of the time, respectively).

Additional chi-square analyses were performed on the data pertaining to major reasons for success or failure in consultation. Comparisons involving both reason for success and reason for failure by sex of the school psychologist, years of school psychology experience, percentage of time spent in consultation, perceived competency in consultation, and degree held all were nonsignificant. Hence, school psychologists with a wide range of experience and characteristics were similar in the attributions they made about success and failure in consultation.

Subcategories for success and failure were also created by the researchers. Each researcher independently read the reasons for successful consultations and developed a set of subcategories for each major category. These subcategories were then combined and modified to form those shown in Table 4. The same process was followed for unsuccessful consultations and these subcategories are shown in Table 5.

Insert Tables 4 and 5 about here

Each questionnaire was then independently reread by the researchers and classified by subcategory. Agreement was obtained on 215 of the successes and 199 of the failures, yielding interrater reliability coefficients of .92 and .85, respectively. The cases in which consensus could not be reached or in which there were several reasons given (none of which was primary) were placed in the noncategorizable subcategory along with those which did not fit into the other subcategories.

Discussion

The results of this study accord well with those of Martin and Curtis (1981). School psychologists most frequently attributed success in consultation to the consultee (42%), secondarily to themselves (22%), and third to the consultant-consultee relationship (14%). Relatively few attributions for success were given for effective interventions, external factors or client behaviors (18% combined). On the other hand, school psychologists overwhelmingly attributed failure to the consultee (77%) with few attributions to themselves (6%) or other factors (17% combined). These attributions were consistent across a

wide range of consultant characteristics, level of training, and years of school psychology experience.

The results on the types of problems dealt with in consultation are also consistent with previous research. Chandy (1974) asked school psychologists to maintain a log of their consultation cases in elementary schools and found that behavioral problems were highest in frequency of involvement (55%), followed by academic problems (17%). In this study, behavioral problems were again highest in frequency (48% of successful consultations and 46% of unsuccessful consultations), followed by academic problems (34% of successful consultations and 39% of unsuccessful consultations). Teacher problems and family problems accounted for a relatively small percentage of consultant involvement.

In order to examine the attributions made for success and failure according to Weiner's (1971,1972,1974) four dimensions of causality, the specific reasons given for success and failure were recategorized as either internal-stable, internal-temporary, external-stable, or external-temporary. A chi-square analysis was performed on these data which yielded a highly significant difference among the four categories between success and failure conditions ($X^2(3) = 38.13$; $p < .001$). Most of the difference was attributable to two of the categories. First, school psychologists made 45 attributions (22.3%) to

internal-stable causes in the success condition, but only 12 attributions (5.8%) to internal-stable causes in the failure condition. Conversely, the respondents made only 39 attributions (19.3%) to external-stable causes in the success condition compared to 86 attributions (41.3%) to external-stable causes in the failure condition.

These findings carry implications for school psychologists perceptions about the potential for success and failure in future consultations. As pointed out by Bar-Tal (1978), it is the combination of internal-temporary and external-stable attributions in success situations that may lead to uncertainty about success in similar later circumstances. The school psychologists in this sample made only 21.8% such attributions for success indicating that their expectancy for future success in consultation is quite high.

It has also been pointed out that attributions to internal-stable causes in failure situations reduce further the expectancy for future success, whereas attributions to external-temporary causes for failure may facilitate the perception of future success. For this sample of school psychologists, only 5.8% of the former attributions were made, while 51.9% of the latter attributions were made. Again, this appears to indicate that even though failures occur in consultation, the perception of the chances for future success may still remain quite high.

Regardless of the specific theoretical orientations of the various models proposed for school based consultation, all of the approaches emphasize the importance of collaboration. Ideally, neither the consultant or consultee is to view his or her expertise as more important in problem-solving, but rather the process of mutually arriving at solutions is to remain central. It is clear from the results of this study that school psychologists are far from viewing the collaborative aspects of consultation as pivotal to success or failure. Rather, specific acts or characteristics of either the consultant or consultee are most often identified as the catalyst for success or failure. This is particularly true of unsuccessful consultations where only 1% (compared to 14% for successful consultations) of the respondents attributed failure to the consultant-consultee relationship. As in the Martin and Curtis study, the most commonly cited specific reasons for success or failure included consultant or consultee expertise, motivational factors, openness to new ideas, and follow-through. As they pointed out, these attributions are relatively unsophisticated and fail to consider many of the relationship variables that influence outcomes of consultation.

This raises one final issue in attempting to understand the patterns of attributions made for success and failure in consultation - that of accuracy of school psychologists'

perceptions. It is not possible to determine from this study, or the one by Martin and Curtis, the relative accuracy of the attributions made. By their very nature, attributions of causality contain a degree of subjectivity. Precisely how this subjectivity contributes to the formation of attributions of success and failure in consultation is not known. In future research it would be informative to collect information from objective third parties who have observed school psychologists' consultations and record the attributions they offer for success and failure. Because of their objective status, these observers might be able to view the interplay between consultant and consultee more clearly and offer valuable insights into the reasons for success and failure not perceived by those directly involved. On the other hand, school psychologists' perceptions might be validated in many cases. This issue clearly requires investigation as it leads to different implications for training in effective consultation.

In conclusion, several suggestions for training programs in school psychology can be drawn from this study. First, there appears to be a need for inservice training of some practicing school psychologists regarding consultation. Because the majority of practicing school psychologists received no formal training in this area, they would likely benefit from continuing education approaches to upgrading their skills in consultation. Second, there also appears to

be a need for more intensive training in the dynamics of the consultant-consultee relationship. This would be particularly valuable during preservice training, where school psychology students could be assisted in understanding the many relationship variables that influence outcomes of consultation. Finally, training is needed in methods of dealing with consultee negativism and resistance when they do arise. A number of the respondents indicated that when they encountered these problems during consultation, they reacted poorly and closed the door to further communication. Clearly, this is a problem that needs to be rectified by acquiring skills and techniques that will aid in maintaining effective relationships, even in difficult cases.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

	N	%
Sex		
Male	141	60.3
Female	93	39.7
Region of Employment*		
Northeast	71	30.3
Southeast	50	21.4
North Central	57	24.4
West Central	20	8.6
West	19	8.1
Unknown	17	7.2
School Psychology Experience		
0- 5 years	56	23.9
6-10 years	96	41.0
11-15 years	46	19.7
16-20 years	25	10.7
21 + years	10	4.3
Not reported	1	.4

Table 1 (cont.)

	N	%
Teaching Experience		
None	111	47.4
1- 5 years	78	33.3
6-10 years	32	13.7
11-15 years	7	2.9
16-20 years	6	2.7
Highest College Degree		
Master's	26	11.1
Master's + 30	102	43.6
Specialist or Equivalent	63	26.9
Doctoral	43	18.4
Psychologist to Student Ratio		
<1:1000	58	24.8
1:1000-1:1500	45	19.2
1:1501-1:2000	37	15.8
1:2001-1:2500	38	16.2
1:2501-1:3000	21	9.0
>1:3001	35	15.0

Table 1 (cont.)

	N	%
Time Spent in Consultation		
<10%	30	12.8
10-20%	102	43.6
21-30%	49	20.9
31-40%	20	8.6
41-50%	17	7.3
>50%	16	6.8
Time Desired for Consultation		
<10%	5	2.1
10-20%	35	15.0
21-30%	56	23.9
31-40%	44	18.8
41-50%	55	23.5
>50%	39	16.7

*Geographical regions consist of the following states:

Northeast: CT, DE, MA, ME, NJ, NY, PA, RI

Southeast: FL, GA, MD, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV

North Central: IL, IN, OH, MI, WI

West Central: IA, KS, LA, MO, NE, ND, OK, SD

West: AK, AZ, CA, CO, ID, OR, WA

Table 2

Table of Consultation Problem

	Successful		Unsuccessful	
	N	%	N	%
Student Problems	192	83%	197	85%
Behavioral	112	48%	106	46%
Acting-out; disruptive	37	16%	38	16%
Inappropriate behavior	36	16%	43	19%
School attendance/phobia/refusal	17	7%	16	7%
Affective difficulties (anxiety, suicidal, depressed, dependent)	13	5%	7	3%
Encopresis/enuresis	6	3%	0	
Chemical dependency	3	1%	2	1%
Academic	80	34%	91	39%
Underachievement; academic difficulties	27	12%	47	20%
Short attention span; hyperactive	4	2%	4	2%
Program placement (LD, ED, etc.)	41	17%	31	13%
Program planning	6	3%	6	3%
Retention	2	1%	3	1%
Teacher Problems	14	6%	8	3%
Behavior/classroom management	14	6%	8	3%

Table 2 (cont.)

	Successful		Unsuccessful	
	N	%	N	%
Family Problems	18	8%	11	5%
Family/home difficulties	6	2%	1	<1%
Accepting child's handicap	3	1%	9	4%
Child rearing/parenting	5	2%	1	<1%
Overprotection	1	<1%	0	
Parent/child conflict	3	1%	0	
Miscellaneous	9	4%	16	7%

Table 3

Primary Reasons for Successful and Unsuccessful Consultation

	Successful		Unsuccessful	
	N	%	N	%
Acts or characteristics of the consultant	51	22%	13	6%
Acts or characteristics of the consultee	99	42%	181	77%
The consultant-consultee relationship	32	14%	3	1%
Nature of the interventions	26	11%	0	0%
External factors	6	3%	23	10%
Client behavior	9	4%	4	2%
Noncategorizable in major category	11	4%	10	4%

Table 4

Specific Reasons for Successful Consultation

	N*	%*
Acts or characteristics of the consultant		
Credibility of consultant (e.g. expertise, knowledge, demonstration of techniques)	29	57%
Communication/interpersonal skills of consultant	13	25%
Motivation/persistence of consultant	5	10%
Consultant was perceived as trustworthy	3	6%
Noncategorizable in subcategory	1	1%
Acts or characteristics of the consultee		
Consultee was cooperative, motivated, had positive attitude	35	36%
Consultee was flexible, open to new ideas	21	21%
Consultee followed through/was consistent	19	19%
Consultee understood problem/was objective	12	12%
Consultee was confident/skillful	6	6%
Noncategorizable in subcategory	6	6%
The consultant-consultee relationship		
Cooperated and worked well together	14	44%
Open, effective communication	11	34%
Mutual responsibility and goals	4	13%
Noncategorizable in subcategory	3	9%

Table 4 (cont.)

Nature of the interventions		
Acceptable intervention designed/implemented	21	81%
Referral to appropriate treatment program/ placement	5	19%
External factors		
Sufficient time to work on problem	4	67%
Noncategorizable in subcategory	2	33%

*Refers to totals within subcategories

Table 5

Specific Reasons for Unsuccessful Consultation

	N*	%*
Acts or characteristics of the consultant		
Consultant lacked skill/expertise	8	64%
Consultant could not facilitate change	3	21%
Consultant did not fully understand problem	2	15%
Acts or characteristics of the consultee		
Consultee was uncooperative, unmotivated, had negative attitude	47	26%
Consultee not open to new ideas/inflexible	45	25%
Consultee did not follow through/inconsistent	28	15%
Consultee could not acknowledge existence of problem	25	14%
Teacher wanted child out of classroom	14	8%
Consultee lacked skill/objectivity	11	6%
Noncategorizable in subcategory	11	6%
The consultant-consultee relationship		
Unreconcilable differences	2	67%
Poor communication	1	33%

Table 5 (cont.)

	N*	%*
External factors		
Insufficient time to work on problem	5	22%
Lack of family support	5	22%
Lack of administrative support/action	5	22%
Outside agency/person created difficulty	2	8%
Noncategorizable in subcategory	6	26%
Client behavior		
Persistence of client behavior	3	75%
Noncategorizable in subcategory	1	25%

*Refers to totals within subcategories